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A Systemic-Functional Approach To Academic English

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Synopsis

Halliday's systemic-functional grammar, which is very popular at present, is a set of profound and practical theories. Academic English (AE), as an important offshoot of English for Specific Purpose (ESP), is attracting more and more people's attention. The objective of this thesis is to use Halliday's linguistic theory to analyse the lexicogrammatical features of AE. It is composed of an introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion.

Introduction

The inseparable relationship between man and language is first put forward in this part. Although language is ubiquitous, it does not obtain enough concern. People often take it for granted. Then the study of language—linguistics is briefly examined, which has a long history and yet is a new discipline. Finally, a rough outline of the thesis is presented.

Chapter One Review and Evaluation

The appearance and development of any linguistic theory is not isolated. Therefore, in order to get a better understanding of Halliday's systemic-functional grammar, it is necessary to give a brief review of linguistics from the comparative and historical linguistics of the 19th century, through Saussure-- the father of modern linguistics, the Prague School, the structuralist and descriptive linguistics of America, Chomsky's transformational-generative grammar, to London School. Then an evaluation is presented, through which Halliday's functional theory is found more appropriate and comprehensive.

Chapter Two Theoretical Basis—Halliday's Systemic-Functional Grammar

The theoretical basis of this thesis is Halliday's systemic-functional grammar. The elaboration of it can be divided into ten sections: (1) theoretical sources; (2) 'context of situation' & 'language as social semiotic'; (3) language as behaviour potential; (4) language as meaning potential; (5) theory of register; (6) meta-functions of language; (7) language as a multiple coding system; (8) structure & system; (9) text, texture, and register theory; (10) functional stylistics. Thus, this chapter paves the way for the analysis of Chapter Three.

Chapter Three Lexicogrammatical Features of Academic English

This chapter introduces the register characteristics of Academic English (AE) in terms of field, tenor, and mode. Field, tenor, and mode, as the three situational factors, are

corresponding to the three components of the semantic system—ideational meaning, interpersonal meaning, and textual meaning. They tend to accomplish the three basic functions of language—ideational function, interpersonal function, and textual function. Therefore, a data base consisting of 50 extracts of academic writings in biology, industry, environmental science, computer science, aircraft engineering, biomedical engineering, economics, law, philosophy, politics, etc. is established in order to examine the lexicogrammatical features of AE from three perspectives: features of ideational function, features of interpersonal function, and features of textual function, each of which is studied in detail. Through the analysis of these features, we can see that they are in accordance with the register characteristics of AE.

Chapter Four Application in Foreign Language Teaching

AE is a branch of ESP. The origin, development, nature, and characteristics of ESP is presented in this chapter. Halliday's systemic-functional grammar is not only great in theory, but also worthwhile in practice. This chapter also gives three suggestions concerning foreign language teaching.

Conclusion

This part summarizes the basic viewpoints of this thesis and points out that the success of systemic-functional grammar not only lies in its profound and original thoughts, but also in its contributions to practical work. Meanwhile, the author of the paper predicts that linguistics will care more about man and society.

Key Words

Systemic-Functional Grammar, Lexicogrammar, Academic English, Foreign Language Teaching

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Introduction

In the long, long river of human history, language always goes hand in hand with every step forward mankind takes. People live in its world where language penetrates every field of man's life. Without language neither activities concerned with the participation of human beings can be carried out nor can human society and civilization have developed. Language is an inseparable partner that has accompanied mankind for such a long way. It is not intangible like air though it is also abstract in one form and air is also indispensable to life. Similarly, it is not touchable like bread though it is equally concrete in the other form and bread is equally necessary to be alive.

LANGUAGE is usually defined as 'a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used for human communication' (Hu Zhuanglin et al, 1987:3) in the form of speech or writing.

Language is a most precious treasure unique to mankind. Throughout human history, it has been used as a tool or medium in every aspect of social life—to organize activities, to exchange ideas, to convey thoughts, and to express feelings. Especially in modern times, with the ever-increasing development of science and technology and the arrival of information age, language, as the main carrier of information, is playing a more and more important role. Yet, it is a usual case that the seemingly simplest turn out to be the most complex. So is language, which is so common in everyday life that people as language users often take many things about it for granted without any awareness, comment, or questioning. Actually, it is far more complex than most people have imagined or assumed.

Because of the unseparated relationships between language and man, thinkers and scholars in all corners of the world, since the ancient times, have been trying to explore this mysterious entity—its origin, nature, development, and functions. The study of it is called LINGUISTICS—the scientific study of language. Although the interpretations of the words 'science' and 'scientific' are diverse, not only in the past, but also at present, this is a popular definition.

The study of language can date back to ancient Greece. As Robins (1967: 5-6) states,

'Interest in language and in practical linguistic problems led independently to linguistic science in more than one centre of civilization. Each had its own merits and its own achievements, and in the course of history each has come into contact with the European linguistic tradition and has contributed to it.'

Despite the remarkable achievements made in the work of the ancient Indian linguistics represented by Pāṇini on Sanskrit grammar and phonology, 'it is sensible to begin the history

of linguistics studies with the achievements of the ancient Greeks' (ibid:9). This is not to claim that the European studies in this field is superior to those of the ancient Indians, but because in the history of European linguistics, a clear thread can be detected: the research findings of the ancient Greeks were taken over by the Romans, passed on by the late Latin Grammarians to the Middle Age, and accepted by the modern world in and after the Renaissance. Many changes in theories, ideas, concepts, and emphasis have occurred; yet the overall process is unbroken continuity.

Linguistics, however, is a young discipline, because it is not until the 19th century that linguistics becomes a science in strictly modern sense. The over 2000 years of language study is traditionally named 'philology', which lacks a scientific approach. From the 19th century, linguistics turns on a new page which is more colorful and more significant than ever before.

The aim of this thesis is to use Halliday's theory of systemic-functional grammar, which is currently flourishing, to analyse the lexicogrammatical features of Academic English.

Chapter One is a review and an evaluation of linguistics from the 19th century to the present, since linguistic study can not be fully explained and comprehended without reference to what has happened. Through review and evaluation Halliday's theory is found more appropriate to the analysis.

Chapter Two is devoted to Halliday's linguistic theory which is the theoretical basis of the thesis.

Chapter Three centres on the analysis of the lexicogrammatical features of Academic English by adopting Halliday's systemic functional grammar from the perspective of meta-functions—ideational, interpersonal, and textual.

Chapter Four is concerned with English for Specific Purposes (ESP), of which Academic English is a branch, and proposes some suggestions for Foreign Language Teaching (FLT).

Conclusion gives a summary of the thesis.

The above is the rough outline of the thesis.

Chapter One Review and Evaluation

1.1 Brief Review of Linguistics from the 19th century to the Present

1.1.1 Comparative and Historical Linguistics of the 19th Century

The 19th century is an epoch-making era when Darwin's theory of evolution and dialectics represented by Hegel not only gave a tremendous push to natural sciences, but also injected nutrition into the old linguistics. These two ideological trends promoted the birth and independence of linguistics as a modern science. Additionally, the establishment of global communication routes made it possible that western linguists obtained more sources of language materials outside Europe.

It is commonly accepted that linguistics of the 19th century was devoted to the comparative and historical study of languages, especially of the Indo-European languages. Although prior to the 19th century, scholars had tried comparing and contrasting different languages, and exploring the history of languages, their work remained largely in isolation, without developing into a strict system. Most of the advances in linguistic theory were made in the field of historical study of Indo-European languages. Among them, the discovery of Sanskrit, the classical language of India, was the principal source of development. 'It was indeed the comparison of the inflexional and derivational morphology of Sanskrit and the other Indo-European languages, especially Latin and Greek on which the early comparatists concentrated' (Robins, 1967:170). It is usually said that the Dane R. Rask, the Germans J. Grimm, F. Bopp, and W. von Humboldt were the founders of comparative and historical linguistics. They were the best known in the early 19th century, who independently promoted the rebirth of linguistic science. After them, a vigorous campaign for comparative and historical research was launched throughout Europe.

In the mid-19th century, A. Schleicher from Germany was the most important and influential historical linguist. His contributions were manifested in three respects: theory of genetic relationships of languages, comparative method of reconstructing proto-languages, and linguistic typology. Schleicher's linguistic viewpoints were deeply influenced by his interests in philosophy, especially Hegelian dialectic, and in botany, particularly Darwin's theory of evolution.

A. Schleicher argued strongly that 'linguistics should be regarded as one of the natural sciences to which Darwin's theory applies' (Sampson, 1980:18). He held that language had its own law of development which was just like the evolutionary process of organism. He adopted the classification method used in botany for plants to investigate historical genetic relationships of languages. Genealogical tree model, or the Stammbaumtheorie, is the 'family tree' he put forward, which is similar to that of organic evolution in form. This model 'represents an important development in Indo-European historical linguistics, and in historical linguistic theory in general' (Robins, 1967:179).

It is well-known that one of the greatest achievements of modern science in the 19th century was the establishment of the theory of organic evolution. Schleicher's theory of linguistic history was closely related to Darwinism prevalent in the second half of the century. He acknowledged publicly in his *Darwinian theory and linguistics* that his linguistic theory was in accordance with Darwinism. He even argued that 'the validity of the evolutionary account can be confirmed more easily for language than with respect to the plant and animal kingdoms' (Sampson,1980:19).

Schleicher's method of linguistic typology is the combination of Hegelian philosophy and Humboldt's typology. He divided language into three types—isolating (where grammatical form has no effect on meaning, e.g. Chinese), agglutinating (where language unit includes both form and meaning, while the link between root and affix can be told, e.g. Turkish), and flexional (where meaning and form are interwoven; root has its own inflections and can be attached with affix, while affix will cause changes in meaning, e.g. Latin and Greek).

The last quarter of the 19th century saw the rise of Neogrammarism whose major advocates were H. Osthoff and K. Brugmann. Compared with other linguists, Neogrammarians attached more importance to data and laws governing the data, while paying less attention to theory. They wished to make historical linguistics an exact science. This down-to-earth attitude is necessary for scientific research; yet they abandoned the essence of earlier linguists.

Meanwhile, Neogrammarism seemed to imply that language existed independently of human being. Man was powerless in the face of linguistic changes which were bounded by mechanical movements. Such views deny man's intelligence of governing language. Neogrammarism met severe criticism.

Opposed to Neogrammarism is Neo-linguistics made up of German and Italian scholars represented by K. Vossler. This school emphasized speaker's creativity in language. It was the speaker who was playing the active role in linguistic changes, rather than mechanical movements.

Generally speaking, linguists of the 19th century make great accomplishments in comparative and historical linguistics. They put forward the view that many languages were derived from the same parent language, and drew the 'genealogical tree'. Their historical attitude towards language is worthwhile. They set up historical linguistics as a science in reality. Yet, they also reveal some limitations.

Their work is chiefly confined to the Indo-European family. Even in this case, their data are often not enough.

Many 19th-century linguists looked upon language as an organism equal to plants and animals. Their equation of linguistics with biology is proved wrong nowadays in many

aspects.

Neogrammarism formed a link between comparative and historical linguistics of the 19th century and structuralist grammar of the early 20th century. Their exposition forecasts the birth of structuralism.

1.1.2 Ferdinand de Saussure—the Father of Modern Linguistics

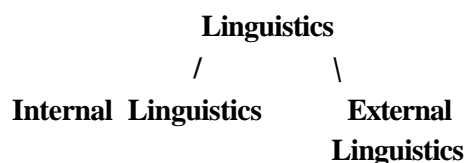
By the end of the 19th century, the biological perspective toward language had been largely abandoned. Its shortcomings were exposed more and more obviously. The years around 1900 marked a turning-point in the history of linguistics. There was a shift from historical linguistics, known as ‘diachronic linguistics’ which predominated the 19th-century linguistic research, to what is known as ‘synchronic linguistics’. The primary contrast between the last two centuries is that between historical linguistics and descriptive linguistics. The man who promoted the shift is Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, whose linguistic theory symbolizes the beginning of modern linguistics. His impact can be detected in every linguistic school of the 20th century in different degrees.

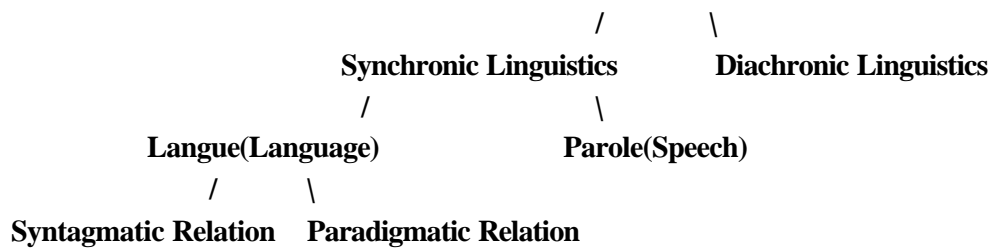
Saussure’s set of theories is by no means out of the void. It is intimately connected with the then popular trends of thought in social sciences, particularly with sociology, psychology and the development tendency of linguistics. German sociologist Durkheim, the founder of modern sociology, gave definition to ‘social fact’, which existed in the collective mind. At the same time, Austrian psychologist Freud put forward the concept of ‘unconsciousness’, which he held has been internalized in man’s mind. In linguistics, except Neogrammarism, Saussure was also affected by American scholar Whitney, to whom, language was one of social institutions. Saussure’s linguistic viewpoints were displayed in *Cours de linguistique générale* (*Course in General Linguistics*). In this masterpiece, it is not difficult to find the influence of the then social ideology.

Except being a comparative and historical linguist, Saussure set up the true science of linguistics. His most important contribution was made in the theory of general linguistics.

Saussure’s linguistic theory goes close to sociology. He stressed the social nature of language. He said that ‘Language is a social fact’ (Saussure, 1916; trans1966:6) and ‘Language is a social institution’ (ibid:15). He defined language as ‘both a social product of the faculty of speech and a collection of necessary conventions that have been adopted by a social body to permit individuals to exercise that faculty’ (ibid:9).

By adopting dichotomy, Saussure made the following division:





Among the above pairs of comparisons, Saussure gave first place to internal linguistics, synchronic linguistics, langue, and syntagmatic relation.

Saussure is the first to regard SEMIOLOGY as ‘a science that studies the life of signs within society’ (ibid:16). Saussure proposed the concept of linguistic system which included two sign systems SIGNIFIED and SIGNIFIER. Saussure would not accept the idea of viewing language as a naming-process. For him, ‘The linguistic sign unites not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image’ (ibid:66). Sign was the combination of concept ‘signified’ and sound-image ‘signifier’. Saussure went on to point out that of all sign systems, language was the most important and complex one.

When we say that Saussure is the father of modern linguistics, we mean that it is Saussure who first clarified the objectives of linguistics, defined the tasks of linguists, and set up the actual direction for linguistics, making linguistics a science in the strictest sense.

Johnathan Culler makes such a comment on Saussure’s status in linguistics:

Ferdinand de Saussure is the father of modern linguistics, the man who reorganized the systematic study of language and languages in such a way as to make possible the achievements of twentieth-century linguistics. This alone would make him a Modern Master: master of a discipline which he made modern. (qtd. in Hu Zhuanglin et al. 1987:350.)

1.1.3. The Prague School

It is generally accepted that the Prague School was the most influential school after Saussure and marked the beginning of functionalism. In terms of the school’s achievements, American linguist D. Bolinger makes such a remark: ‘no other European group has wielded quite as much influence as this one (the Prague school)’; ‘The Prague group has influenced every important development in the United States’ (ibid:358-9).

The Prague School, founded in 1926 by Vilem Mathesius, was represented by Roman Jakobson and Nikolai Trubetzkoy. Functionalism in linguistics came from this school. Although the Prague School took over Saussure’s view that language was a system and stressed the primary position of synchronic linguistics, Prague linguists tried not only to describe linguistic phenomena but also to explain them. Therefore, they took the social

dimension of language most seriously. The key characteristics of Prague linguistics is that it sees language in terms of function. It believes that 'the phonological, grammatical and semantic structures of a language are determined by the functions they have to perform in the societies in which they operate' (Lyons,1981:224).

Mathesius advanced the theory of THEME and RHEME, and the notion of FUNCTIONAL SENTENCE PERSPECTIVE (FSP). Theme is the point of departure and Rheme the goal of discourse. FSP was created to describe information distribution in sentences, which is divided into known information (or given information) and new information. Usually, Theme coincides with known information, and Rheme with new information unless some special effects are to be achieved.

Meanwhile, the amount of information carried by each linguistic element is shown through COMMUNICATIVE DYNAMISM (CD) raised by Jan Firbas, whose theory goes like this: communication is not a static but a dynamic phenomenon; CD is an inherent feature of communication in the course of information development. The amount of CD of a linguistic element depends on its contribution to the process of communication, namely its effect upon promoting communication.

The functional theory of the Prague School is very important in the development of linguistics, particularly in functional linguistics. In Halliday's functional grammar, these terms are adopted and further developed.

Another great contribution made by the school is in the field of PHONOLOGY, of which the Prague School is the founder. They distinguished phonology from phonetics and analysed phonemes into distinctive features. The most important work on it is Trubetzkoy's *Grundzüge der Phonologie (principles of phonology)*.

1.1.4 Structuralist and Descriptive Linguistics of America

Compared with European traditional linguistics, American linguistics is quite different due to their different social, cultural, and historical backgrounds. In America, during the 1920s, it was descriptive linguistics that received the most attention. American descriptive linguistics came from anthropology.

In the early 20th century, in order to preserve the dying American Indian languages, American anthropologists, of whom F. Boas is the most important one, shouldered the responsibility of recording and describing Indian languages instead of imposing on them grammatical descriptions based on their Indo-European languages. Unlike European linguists who focused on the universals in language, Boas emphasized the diversity of language, and uncovered the particular grammatical structure of each kind of language. Boas laid a foundation for American descriptive linguistics.

Another anthropological pioneer in American descriptive linguistics is E. Sapir, who

was engaged in the description of American Indian languages after his meeting with Boas. Sapir stressed the inter-relationship between language and culture, and between language and thinking.

In the former case, Sapir is a sociolinguist. He states that

‘... one cannot be studied in isolation from the other, and insisting also that language is a universal human property, that no tribe has ever been found without a language, that language is an essentially perfect means of expression among every known people, and that there are no primitive languages. (*The Linguistics Encyclopedia*, 1991:307)

In the later case, Sapir is a mentalist. His mentalist claim is that

a person's native language sets up a series of categories which act as a pair of grid spectacles through which s/he views the world; it categorizes experience for the speakers of the language. (ibid:306)

This claim became known as the ‘Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis’. Its basic argument is that ‘the way people view the world is determined wholly or partly by the structure of their NATIVE LANGUAGE’ (Richards, et al, 1985:167). Although the statement gives rise to a lot of controversy, their hypothesis made people more concerned with the relations between language and culture, and between language and thinking, and with the influences of culture on language, of language on thinking.

The third, but the most influential representative of American structuralist and descriptive linguistics is L. Bloomfield. He initiated a linguistic school – Structuralist Linguistics. During the 1930s and the 1940s this school played a dominant role in American linguistic circle. This period is called ‘Bloomfield era’.

The 1920s and the 1930s witnessed the vogue of Logical Positivism of R. Carnap and Behaviourism of J. B. Watson. Their impact on Bloomfield was tremendous. Bloomfield actively applied these theories to the study of language. Language learning, from the perspective of Behaviourist psychology, was a process of habit forming.

For Bloomfield, linguistics was a branch of psychology, and specifically of the positivistic brand of psychology known as *behaviourism*. Bloomfield's theorizing about language was heavily behaviouristic (Sampson, 1980:64).

For Bloomfield, to analyse meaning on a language is to show what stimuli evoke given utterances as responses, and what behavioural responses are evoked by given spoken stimuli (ibid:68).

Guided by empiricism, Bloomfield was strictly scientific and mechanistic in

methodology and formal analysis. In his masterpiece *Language*, he argues that ‘a scientific theory of language must reject all data that was directly observable or physically measurable’ (qtd. in *The Linguistics Encyclopedia*, 1991:53). Consequently, he felt rather pessimistic about semantics.

American Structuralism adopted IMMEDIATE CONSTITUENT ANALYSIS (IC analysis) to show the sequential and hierarchical relations of sentence structure. This approach is often criticised for its neglect of meaning.

American structuralist and descriptive linguistics has its own weakness, especially the ‘Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis’ and behaviourist linguistics. However, its emphasis on objectivity and practicality is worthwhile.

1.1.5 Transformational-Generative Grammar of Noam Chomsky

When Chomsky's *Syntactic Structure* was published in 1957, a revolution in linguistics came. It is the so-called ‘Chomskyan Revolution’. As a traitor to American structuralist and descriptive grammar, Chomsky put forward the famous TRANSFORMATIONAL-GENERATIVE GRAMMAR (TG Grammar).

Chomsky's theory can be covered under rationalist linguistics because of its emphasis on innateness. Thus, the name of Chomsky is associated with INNATENESS HYPOTHESIS. By observing children's learning of their mother tongue, Chomsky found that a normal person was born with what he called LANGUAGE ACQUISITION DEVICE (LAD), including ‘basic knowledge about the nature and structure of human language’ (Richard, J. et al, 1985:154), which made it possible for children to ‘develop *competence* in their first language in a relatively short time, merely by being exposed to it’ (ibid:154). Therefore, for Chomsky, the aim of linguistics was to study the universal grammar which with finite rules could generate infinite number of sentences. Attempting to provide a model to describe all languages, Chomsky proposed his TG Grammar, of which syntax was the heart of linguistics.

Another well-known feature of Chomsky's approach toward language is the distinction he made between COMPETENCE and PERFORMANCE. Competence referred to an ideal speaker's internalized grammar of a language, ‘an idealized knowledge of a language’, while performance was a person's actualized use of a language. Of the two, competence was the task of linguists.

The distinction made by Chomsky is different from Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole*. Chomsky's competence is a psychological matter whereas Saussure's *langue* is a social product.

Chomsky opened a new situation for linguistics. Commenting on his position, J. Lyons says:

Right or wrong, Chomsky's theory of grammar is undoubtedly the most dynamic and influential; and no linguist who wishes to keep abreast of current developments in his subject can afford to ignore Chomsky's theoretical pronouncements. Every other 'school' of linguistics at the present time tends to define its position in relation to Chomsky's views on particular issues. (Lyons, 1970:1-2)

1.1.6 The London School

Study of language in Britain has a long history. At the close of the 19th century, Britain produced two brilliant phonologists—Sweet Henry and Daniel Jones. Yet, the man who made linguistics a recognized and an academic subject in Britain is J.R. Firth, the head of the London School.

The name of Firth is connected with two fields of linguistics, one being his prosodic analysis in phonology, the other the theory of context of situation in semantics. Firth devoted much of his concern to phonology and put forward the theory of prosodic analysis. Meanwhile, as an important figure in functionalist linguistics, Firth drew and developed the theory of context of situation initiated by Polish anthropologist B. Malinowski.

Malinowski advanced the notions of context of culture and context of situation. He argued that language was not a self-contained system but was 'completely dependent on the society in which it is used' (qtd. in *The Linguistics Encyclopedia*, 1991:158), and that 'we must study meaning with reference to an analysis of the FUNCTIONS of language in any given culture' (ibid:159). He distinguished three major functions of language—the pragmatic function, the magical function, and the narrative function.

Influenced by Malinowski, Firth proposed the notions of typical context of situation and restricted language. Firth also 'extend(ed) this approach to language by treating all linguistic description as the statement of meaning, thereby stretching the application of the equation *meaning is function in context* to cover grammatical and phonological analysis' (Robins, 1967:213).

At the same time, under the influence of Saussure, Firth redefined the notion of system. He thought that language was composed of system and structure. System was the set of paradigmatic units while structure was the syntagmatic ordering of elements. System was treated as a set of choices in a given environment, in a specific context. 'The choices made in the systems will be functionally determined' (*The Linguistics Encyclopedia*, 1991:159).

The London School after Firth is named neo-Firthian school, whose most important representative is M.A.K. Halliday. He continued and developed Firth's fundamental theories, one being context of situation, and the other system.

Halliday studied language from the angle of sociology and put forward the idea of

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